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ABSTRACT

A solution to a perennial library inventory problem by the application of known and proven systematic techniques used in other non-library areas is proposed. The traditional and new approaches are briefly compared and explained while the actual planning and development are discussed with an eye toward producing as an ultimate goal the ideal information center which if fully realized would not have a book on its shelves. The feedback techniques described can be further enhanced by introducing or modifying existing automated routines. The statistics thus derived would greatly assist future library planning. By incorporating the expert knowledge of the specialists in the various areas of interest the librarian operating under the Delphi approach gains an insight infrequently realized that can lead to a more effective and efficient use of space and provide the patrons of a given library with the assurance that the material at their fingertips is of high relevance to their scholarly needs. (Author)

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A Delphi Approach To A Selected Book Retirement Policy

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Abstract

The author presents a proposed solution to a perennial library inventory problem by the application of known and proven systematic techniques used in other non-library areas. The traditional and new approaches are briefly compared and explained while the actual planning and development are discussed with an eye toward producing as an ultimate goal the ideal information center which if fully realized would not have a book on its shelves.

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A Delphi Approach To A Selected Book Retirement Policy

Among the many perrenial problems plaguing all libraries are the twin dilemmas of logical controlled growth and the ever increasing lack of necessary expansion space. This is further aggravated by the fact that many libraries are initially constrained by their location within a building serving other (more tangibly productive) departments. The very nature of the tenant status of the physical plant behoves the librarian to develop a long range comprehensive retirement policy for his collection.

Many circulating library collections, regardless of disciplines involved are divided into books, journals and reports. The journals and reports sections can with some degree of success be treated similarly in that the vintage date has some significant bearing on the anticipated length of its current usage. Therefore it is not uncommon for many libraries to assign by predetermined year or some other similar criteria, certain sections of their serials collection to a storage area on a limited recall basis. It is believed that in some quarters the same is true for a reports collection in that the half life of a report is in many instances shorter than that of a journal article. This author does not necessarily subscribe to that philosophy. My reluctance is somewhat predicated on the old dual requisites for any information retrieval, i.e. awareness and availability.

Report literature does not always lend itself by its very nature to either requisite and therefore quite often fails to fit neatly into a conventional retirement system. This form of literature and its proper treatment should be studied in greater detail.

The area of major concern that comes in view is that of the proper retirement handling of the book collection. Customarily and out of sheer necessity, the librarian and his staff select the older editions and/or the infrequently used items. As we all know, this approach while convenient is not fool-proof. In many instances the newer editions of a particular title are not as comprehensive or truly adequate for specific needs either in industry or on campus. By the same token, frequency of use is not exactly an accurate barometer of the value of a particular title. We then come to the question of exploring a possibly more useful and meaningful method of determining which items earn the right to remain on the current shelves and which are committed to some level of storage.

The Delphi approach as normally applied in other areas is essentially achieving a consensus of expertise opinions or observations on a particular question, project or subject. Ideally, related weights are not assigned to the rank(s) or positions of the individual(s) concerned or participating in the enterprise. According to Dr. Olaf Helmer the Delphi technique is a "method for the systematic solicitation

and collation of expert opinions." * It replaces direct debate by a program of sequential individual interrogations, interspersed with information and opinion feedback derived by computed consensus from earlier parts of the program. It could very easily eliminate committee activity, possibly reducing the effects of specious persuasion, unwillingness to abandon publicly expressed opinions and of course, the bandwagon effect of majority opinion.

It is suggested that the aforementioned Delphi technique properly planned, adjusted, modified and incorporated in a library book retirement policy, could very well lead to a more meaningful use of shelf space from the point of view of the user. The initial stage consists of identifying the specialists and their specialties. Many librarians maintain local authority files which can form the nucleus of this source of the necessary prime ingredient in the setting up of the procedure. In order to monitor the system it is recommended that only one subject area at a time be approached and mastered. If for example we choose the area of Cybernetics and find that we have three authorities in our sphere of interest, we then proceed to ask each person individually to peruse the collection in this area with the idea of relegating the individual titles to one of four states of activity: a.) primary storage; b.) secondary storage; c.) tertiary storage or d.) remain on the shelves. We instruct the specialist to base his decisions on his experience,

training and knowledge of his field of endeavor and its literature. He will not base his decision on usage or vintage. His decisions will be recorded and will remain anonymous. By no means will an item remain unobserved forever in its level of retirement. The librarian after having the three or more experts canvas the selected area must reach the point of deciding the allocation of the items. For example, if title A is designated to be located in tertiary storage by all three experts, the decision is not a difficult one. If on the other hand, one person feels that the item belongs in primary storage; another wishes it to be located in tertiary and the last feels it must be in secondary storage; we do have a problem. Particularly if the librarian for reasons of his own wants to maintain the item on the current shelves. In reality a second look at the item in question by all concerned could resolve the problem or the system itself could permit for a trial period in each stage or any one stage with close surveillance being applied. Multiple copies of the same title could also be utilized to alieviate this problem. A clarification of the terms primary, secondary, tertiary storage areas is perhaps in order at this juncture. In the situations I am referring to, we are dealing with libraries that must relegate their overflow to various other locations on campus. The degree of geographical proximity is in direct relation to accessibility for patrons and staff alike. Needless to say we should also introduce the ultimate choices a.) transferring given item to microform or purchasing

same; b.) transferrring item to a Gifts and Exchange Section for disposal purposes or c.) out and out discarding the item(s) in harmony with the overall policy of the establishment or institution. In essence then, we are referring to a hierarchy of seven catagories:

1.) Library Proper
2.) Primary Storage
3.) Secondary Storage
4.) Tertiary Storage
5.) Form Conversion
6.) Trade or Shift inter or intra system
7.) Discard

In order for the proposed system to become truly operational,score has to be kept and a constant surveillance routine must be in motion. Various libraries can establish their own unique processes for the essential statistical overview. One manual approach could simply be by varying color codes of the loan cards e.g. a.) current stacks-white; b.) primary-red; c.) secondary-blue; d.) tertiary-yellow. In compiling daily statistics, a member of the library staff could easily note the general circulation trends of the different catagories and can by a pre-determined agreement based on frequency of use over a period of time or (recall) recommend the proper change of status and duly note same. Obviously, we are advocating a constant historical overview of the flow of books from stage to stage. Inherently involved in the system would be an alerting of the faculty who were involved, of the progress and state of their original recommendations. From a

mechanized vantage point, if a library has its circulation system automated, it would require little alteration to identify the origin of the location of the item and via proper programming one can establish the required information necessary for intelligent space utilization.

Conclusion

It must be restated that the Delphi approach to a Book Retirement Policy is to merely suggest an attempt to apply the systematic techniques used in other disciplines to a very serious library problem that affects the entire spectrum of the library complex. The gluttoning of library shelves with material that in some instances have outlived their usefullness not necessarily because of date or frequency of use but rather due to the nature of the changing scene or perhaps the proliferation of old wine in new bottles. By bringing the area specialists into the initial and repeated evaluations of the items, promotes and maintains a greater awareness of the quality of the collection. Unfortunately the acquisition program of most libraries is generally conceived of as being completely separate and distinct from any logical or traditional weeding program. One could quite accurately postulate that the quality of the library of tomorrow could very easily be influenced on how we handle our storage problems today. As we progress from the first to the third levels of storage selection we find that from the space point of view we shant require the same amount of room for storage purposes as we do for the regular library and since accessibility decreases as we move to the tertiary degree, the quarters required do not necessitate the normal floor spacing for patrons or for that matter expansion room on the individual shelves. This

then opens areas for book storage that perhaps previously have not been thought of in that context; i.e. basements, attics and reconverted old warehouses, etc.

The ultimate goals and side effects of the Delphi approach then are as follows: 1.) a more dynamic current and useful collection, 2.) a more involved clientele, 3.) the logical growth of the collection, 4.) a positive influence on more reasonable book selection policies and procedures, 5.) a much longer postponement of either moving to new quarters, expanding present quarters or constructing a new library and the financial savings realized and 6.) a more involved and knowledgable library staff. I commend this project with any modifications you desire for your further consideration.

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